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# Written statement* submitted by Christian Solidarity Worldwide, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[25 May 2018]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

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# Freedom of Religion or Belief in Eritrea

1. CSW is a human rights organisation specialising in the right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB). CSW has been monitoring and researching developments in Eritrea since 2002, including annual interviews with refugees and their community leaders in four nations. This submission draws on detailed witness testimonies collated between 2003 and 2016.

2. CSW welcomes the continued efforts of the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in Eritrea, and urges the Council to renew its support for this mandate.

**Freedom of Religion or Belief**

3. Perceived threats to national unity have meant that the extensive rights enshrined within the unimplemented national constitution of Eritrea, which was drafted and ratified by the National Assembly in 1997, remain disregarded. Instead, the government has embarked on a course of repression and currently stands accused of atrocity crimes, including the crime of persecution, since independence.

4. The government has a long-held ideological antipathy towards all religion, seemingly viewing faith as divisive. Objective 7 of the 1977 National Democratic Program of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front undertook to 'strictly oppose all the imperialist-created new counter-revolutionary faiths, such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Pentecostal, Baha'i, etc,' and to 'legally punish' anyone attempting to use religion to sow discord or undermine the progress of the Eritrean people during or after the conclusion of the armed conflict.1

5. Jehovah's Witnesses were the first religious community targeted. Doctrinal stipulations meant they did not vote in the 1993 independence referendum, neither do they participate in military aspects of national service. In October 1994, a directive from President Isaias Afewerki effectively deprived Jehovah's Witnesses of their civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights, including being denied official identity cards necessary for the registration of births, deaths and marriages, purchasing property, gaining passports and internal and external travel permits, and commercial licenses. In addition, Jehovah's Witnesses can no longer access government employment, accommodation, schools or hospital services.

6. A government campaign of arrests targeting selected religious communities has been ongoing since 2002, when it effectively outlawed all practices not affiliated with the Catholic, Evangelical Lutheran and Orthodox Christian denominations or Sunni Islam. Other religious groups face insurmountable challenges in gaining registration and therefore recognition. If found practicing their faith, adherents of non-recognised groups are arrested, detained without charge or trial, and can face torture or even death.

7. In a series of machinations between 2006 and 2007 and in violation of canonical law the patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, Abune Antonios, was relieved of all administrative duties, removed from office and placed under incommunicado house arrest, after objecting to increasing governmental interference in ecclesiastical affairs. He was replaced by a government-compliant bishop, who died in 2015 and has not replaced. Patriarch Antonios was allowed to attend, but not address a church service on 16 July 2017, then was transferred to a new location of house arrest.

8. Priests seen as sympathetic to the legitimate patriarch continue to be detained, harassed, forced out of the Church or conscripted. A 2011 report indicated that around 1,700 Orthodox clergy of all ranks were forced out

1 Roy Pateman (1998), *Eritrea: Even the Stones are Burning*

of the church; 1,350 were forcibly conscripted, 23 were detained, 14 were banned from entering any church compound.

**Cases of Arbitrary Detention**

9. Arbitrary detention is widely practiced; tens of thousands of Eritreans continue to be detained without charge or trial in life threatening conditions in over 300 sites across the country where torture is routinely practiced. Prisoners are held in inhumane conditions, including poorly ventilated metal shipping containers or underground cells, and in the open air in desert areas surrounded by barbed wire or thorns.

10. Former prisoners report being forced to undertake extreme physical exercise, to stand for hours in the midday sun, and to endure beatings administered with electric prods, whips or pipes. Reports indicate that in every prison, beatings are administered routinely, systematically, frequently, and even casually on all prisoners, regardless of creed or lack thereof.

11. Some detainees are released when privations and severe mistreatment have rendered them close to death. Reverend Tesfatsion Hagos, the leader of Rhema Church, was detained in May 2004. After a month in Asmara's 4th Police Station, where he was able to receive food and clothing, he was held incommunicado for a year and seven months in Karchele Security Prison, where his hands were chained. He was deprived of blood pressure medication for two years, suffered regular brutal beatings, and was fed very little. Beatings were inflicted to cause maximum internal damage but leave no visible scars, causing him to lose the use of a kidney. By 2010 his health had deteriorated significantly, and he was finally taken for medical treatment. The doctor told the authorities to take him away as he would die within three days. That was when he was released.

12. During May 2017, 122 Christians from non-sanctioned churches were detained: forty-five were arrested in Adi Quala, including entire families, the elderly and a disabled woman. The arrests left 23 children without their parents. Fifteen people were rounded up in Gindae, while in Asmara, 45 people were arrested during one raid and 17 during another.

13. Among those detained was Fikadu Debesay, a mother of four. Fikadu, her husband and their 18 year old son were arrested at their home in Adi Quala, leaving the three younger children – all of them minors – alone. While her son was taken to a labour camp, Fikadu and her husband were eventually held in Metkel Abiet, a purpose-built desert camp situated between the towns of Gahtelai and Shieb in the Northern Red Sea Region, where conditions were harsh. They were mistreated, deprived of adequate food, water, medical treatment and shelter, and interrogated daily about church affairs. Fikadu's health deteriorated in the appalling conditions. She died in August on her way to hospital after an ambulance had been called belatedly. She was buried on 10 August 2017 and her body reportedly showed signs of mistreatment. Her son and husband were not informed of her death, and only learned of it when they were released and returned home months later.

14. Two elderly Jehovah's Witnesses died in Mai Serwa Prison near Asmara, after spending nearly a decade in detention. Both were detained without trial or charge in 2008, after being arrested at their homes. They were transferred to Mai Serwa from the notorious Meitir Camp, where they experienced cruel, inhumane and degrading treatment. Neither man recovered fully from this: 76 year-old Mr Tesfamariam died suddenly on 3 January 2018, and is believed to have suffered a stroke, while 77 year-old Mr Mekonen died on 6 March, reportedly due to kidney failure. They both leave behind wives and children.

15. Hajji Musa Mohammed Nur, the nonagenarian Honorary President of Al Diaa Islamic School in Asmara, died in detention at Asmara's 5th Police Station on Saturday 3 March 2018. He had been held there since his arrest in 2017. Haji Musa had opposed the government's attempted expropriation of the Al Diaa private Islamic school, and resisted pressure for female students to stop wearing the hijab. On 31 October 2017, a rare protest against his arrest and government-imposed restrictions broke out in Asmara. It was dispersed by truncheon-

wielding members of the security services firing live ammunition. Following his burial hundreds were arrested, mainly males, some as young as 13.

16. In recent weeks two long-term prisoners were confirmed released. Pastor Oqbamichael Teklehaimanot, senior pastor of the Kale Hiwot Church, was among 67 people arrested on 9 January 2005 at a wedding ceremony. Most were gradually released; however, Pastor Oqbamichael was one of five who refused to sign papers renouncing their faith. He was transferred to Sawa for "military punishment", and suffered ten months in solitary confinement and severe physical and emotional mistreatment that caused him to suffer a mental breakdown. He was later released but was re-arrested on 1 October 2007. Reports indicate the pastor, now in his seventies, is in poor physical condition. Orthodox scholar *Merigeta* Yitbarek Berhe, who was detained without charge in 2006, has also been released.

**Recommendations to the International Community**

17. Urge Eritrea to implement its constitution, to fully enact all rights enshrined within it, and to ensure full enjoyment of freedom of religion or belief for all citizens in accordance with international statutes it has signed, including the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights (ACHPR), and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)

18. Urge Eritrea to end enforced disappearance, arbitrary arrest and indefinite detention without charge or trial, and bring long-term detainees before recognised courts of law in the presence of international observers, or release them. Eritrea must also be urged to adhere to the Guidelines on the Conditions of Arrest, Police Custody and Pre-Trial Detention in Africa

19. Urge Eritrea to extend invitations to relevant UN Special Procedures, enabling them to conduct unhindered human rights investigations

20. Support the renewal of the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea.